

## SHEEP

Being ‘a lost sheep’ is one of those Biblical expressions which have found its way into the mainstream of English usage – not of course that most people realise where it comes from. Maybe at first we don’t react well to being told we are like sheep – but whilst there is the question of straying and getting lost, which we will return to, the first thing to note is that being sheep is a picture of belonging. The most famous example of this positive aspect of being sheep comes in Psalm 23 – ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ – but that imagery is frequent in both Old and New Testaments. Think of Isaiah’s words about Israel ‘He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.’

We need perhaps to think outside our predominantly urban box, and remember how much sheep were part of the everyday life of most people in Israel. Only the very poorest would not be able to buy two lambs at Passover time – one would be killed and eaten at that time, but the other would become a playmate for the children, and would provide the wool for clothing through the summer. In the autumn it also would be killed, and the meat stored in part to help feed people through the winter months. We will think more about the imagery of the lamb later today. Today we talk of sheep as *domesticated* animals, but in those days they were genuinely *domestic* animals for many people who would not see themselves as farmers. They lived in the house and ate with the family. So that intimacy of the sheep being cared for, and ultimately being a source of blessing was a powerful one for its religious usage when people talked of themselves as being the flock of God. So we shouldn’t underestimate the intimacy of this language – which maybe today we fail to do because sheep are not part of our everyday lives.

Alongside that idea of the people of Israel, or in the New Testament the Christian community being a flock of sheep goes the idea of God as Shepherd. And although references like that are rare in the history books of the Old Testament, they are frequent in the poetry of the Psalms – like the opening of Psalm 80 for example ‘Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, who you lead Joseph like a flock’ and in the writings of the prophets. And that idealised the role of shepherd – so much so that although they talked of the Kings as shepherding Israel, they didn’t get given the title Shepherd – that was God’s alone. In fact kings, military and religious leaders are more often referred to as being inadequate to the task of shepherding – think of Jeremiah’s words: ‘For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the Lord; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered.’

But what emerged in later Old Testament days was the language of Shepherd being applied to the coming Messiah – the one who would deliver the people. Ezekiel, writing long after the time of King David writes ‘My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.’ This is not a new earthly king, but the messenger from God, the agent of God’s renewal. And even then there is a veiled reference to opposition to such a messenger. Zechariah talks about people ‘looking on the one they have

pierced; they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only child.’ So already there are hints of what we are remembering today – the great shepherd of the sheep being killed.

We are all far more familiar with the New Testament usages of Shepherd, because its writers saw in Jesus the fulfilment of that Messianic hope. Jesus himself says that he is the Good Shepherd – precisely taking a title which was formerly reserved for God. We don't hear that as a claim to divinity, but that is what it is.

Jesus the Messianic Shepherd first of all gathers the flock – ‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold’ he says mysteriously. But we assume that to mean that God’s special flock, those who belong to him, will no longer just be the people of Israel. Then taking up the language Zechariah uses, he dies for the flock, and finally in the vision of the Day of Judgement, his flock is gathered again – significantly ‘from every nation’ to be divided – sheep from goats. These are all elements of the Messianic hope, which we believe to be being fulfilled in Jesus. It is perhaps worth pointing out that to most of our eyes, Middle Eastern sheep are indistinguishable from Middle Eastern goats. The shepherd was skilled at doing so – and it was important because the goats needed to have warmth at night, and were brought indoors, whilst the sheep thrived better from being outside.

John never uses the word church in his Gospel – the word is always ‘flock’. You will recall that Peter after the resurrection, when the threefold denial of Good Friday and the night before are balanced by a three-fold Commission, he is commanded to ‘tend my sheep.’ That pastoral language is there in some of the Epistles, but Paul always uses the word ‘church’ rather than ‘flock’. It was a mark of the increasing urbanisation of the Christian community that the sheep and shepherd language began to disappear.

But we must return to be ‘lost sheep’. Jesus, in the passage from Luke 15 we heard is picking up the words from Isaiah about us all having gone astray like sheep – notoriously wayward animals, as anyone who watched ‘One man and his dog’ in years past is well aware of. There is the old preacher’s saying that ‘sin is a short word with ‘I’ in the middle of it. Wanting our own way is the story of Adam and Eve, and at the root not only of the faults of Biblical characters, but our own. But the language about Jesus the Good Shepherd is that he actively goes out to find the lost sheep, and when it is found there is great rejoicing. And just as the old preachers talked about the letter I being at the centre of the word sin, they pointed out that if you put a line through the letter ‘I’ you have the cross. What we are celebrating today is that costly searching for and finding of the lost sheep, and of being restored to that ‘belonging’ I talked about a few minutes ago, which is the undoing of all that we have done wrong.